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ABSTRACT

The Ohio Educational Reform Bill, S.B. 140, mandated that each school system adopt a school-choice policy for parents and students of adjoining districts. This paper describes the choice options that were developed by the Steubenville City Schools and Franciscan University. To meet the state requirements, the Steubenville school system first conducted a needs-assessment study during the 1989-90 school year. The Superintendent's Advisory Committee then reviewed the concerns and submitted recommendations to the board of education and superintendent. A survey was conducted of each public elementary-school parent; 38 parents of parochial students also participated. The next step involved collaboration with Franciscan University to develop computer science, fine arts, math and science, and international studies programs at three of the city's six elementary schools. The pilot choice options have resulted in committed students, parents, staff, and university personnel; the enrollment of parochial and interdistrict students; the development of parental support groups; an increased sense of empowerment among participants; and the expansion of curricular offerings at the middle- and high-school levels. Contains 29 references. (LMI)

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A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN SCHOOL SYSTEM, UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY CAN ENHANCE PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Steubenville is a small, industrialized city in Eastern Ohio. The public school system serves approximately 3,000 students - pre kindergarten through grade 12. It is important to note that the school system is the lone urban district in the area.

Franciscan University was founded in Steubenville, Ohio in 1946. The University is a Catholic, liberal arts institution of approximately 2,000 students.

The Steubenville City Schools, Franciscan University and Community have a rich history of collaborative efforts. The Ohio Educational Reform Bill, S.B. 140, mandated that each school system adopt a policy pertaining to choice for parents and students of adjoining school districts. This policy was to be placed into effect for the 1993-94 school year.

In January, 1989, a Superintendent's Advisory Committee, chaired by a Franciscan University Vice President, recommended to the Steubenville Board of Education that a study be authorized to develop quality choice options in three of the six city school elementary schools. Professional staff, university personnel, parents and community members developed a committee framework to research the positive aspects of choice programming. The work of these school district, university and community members enabled the district to be placed in a proactive posture for the implementation of interdistrict school choice for the 1993-94 school year.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

COLLABORATION

The decade of the 90's will long be remembered as the decade of school restructuring. Kathryn S. Whitaker and Monte Moses (1994) indicate ten key components of restructuring in which the authors emphasize two collaborative elements: an increase in parent and community involvement and the need for the university to provide resources to assist with restructuring (p. 11). Goodlad (1994) calls for school - university partnerships with the transformation of school and university cultures and collaboration with the community (p. 96-97). Clinchy (1994) indicates the need for a truly collaborative root and branch effort to develop ways in which the education of all students at the elementary, secondary and college levels can be recontextualized (p. 761).

The Steubenville, Ohio Community, Schools and Franciscan University have a rich history of collaborative efforts. Several examples include:

1. The styling of a business partnership and community leadership program styled by University and school system personnel. Over 200 community members have passed through this program since 1990.
2. The Advisory Boards of the City Schools and University have representation of community , school system and university members.
3. Resources for staff development and placement of students- ie. student internships, early experience programs, advanced placement programming etc.

are shared between community, school system and university.

CHOICE AND RESTRUCTURING

Of the educational innovations that have been proposed over the past decade for the restructuring of public education, parental choice is at the forefront. Parental choice, the ability of public school parents to choose the school and the type of education that their child will receive, has grown in popularity across the nation. The concept is receiving the acceptance of the nation's parents. Elam (1990) found that a sizable majority (62%) of a national sample of parents favored parental choice for public schools.

Parental choice is thus considered by many as the cornerstone for restructuring public schools. (Raywid, 1989; Nathan, 1989; Zerchykov. 1987). The theory behind the parental choice concept is that it gives parents more control over their children's education and at the same time, creates competition that theoretically, will cause the restructure and improve ineffective and inefficient schools.

Perhaps the most important factor which makes the parental choice concept popular is the strong orientation of consumerism in this country. The right of one to choose is deeply rooted in American values and central to American thinking. For over two hundred years, freedom of choice has long been considered a parental right and an expression of family sovereignty.

During the past decade, the popularity of choice as a means of accessing better

quality education has gained in appeal. The popularity of this concept is based on the increasing dissatisfaction of parents with public schools.(Seeley 1985, Glenn 1989, Gratiot 1979, Olfatpour 1984).

Seeley, (1985) indicated that exit is a natural reaction to dissatisfaction. He reasoned that choice will increasingly receive more attention in the public forum since there is increasing disaffection with public schools; private school parents are finding it difficult to meet tuition payments and many school parents are for the first time considering private and parochial schools. Seeley viewed choice as an " end run " around difficult public school problems. He stated:

> Instead of trying to make educational governance more responsive to the voice of parents, students and citizens or get school bureaucracies to share power or change the direction of militant teacher unionism, choice simply allows dissatisfied parents to pick a school better suited to their children's needs and their family values (p. 85).

Seeley further proposed that public school officials examine their role in light of the exodus of dissatisfied parents.

BENEFITS OF CHOICE

A number of investigators suggested that there were distinct benefits derived from providing choice to parents and students. (Glenn 1989; Fligel 1989; Seeley 1985; Alves and Willie 1987; Fizzell 1987). In Raywid's (1984) synthesis of research on choice, she highlighted these benefits:

Choice heightens the investment of parents in what has been chosen and provides a more coherent group of like minded individuals. She also pointed out that schools of choice produced high levels of satisfaction for both parents

and students.

With regard to students, Raywid (1989) reported that schools of choice generally have higher levels of student attendance and lower drop out rates. Improved student attitudes toward schooling were especially significant among the less-successful students. She wrote:

> It is not unusual for successful students in any school to be positively disposed toward their school. What seems unique to schools of choice, however, is the finding of positive attitudes among less successful students (p. 28).

Raywid (1984) indicated that teachers are recipients of benefits when they are provided a choice of teaching in schools of choice. In addition to decreased discipline problems and teacher- student conflicts, teachers enjoyed high levels of autonomy and control over their programs. Morale was clearly enhanced in this climate of professional autonomy and collegiality.

Autonomy was found to be the greatest single predictor of school effectiveness in a recent study of choice relative to the organization of public and non public schools (Chubb and Moe, 1990). Unlike the traditional arguments for choice which are based on political and economic rationale, Chubb and Moe based their arguments for choice on effective schools research. They asserted that autonomy was the most critical factor for elevating school effectiveness. They suggested that private schools are more autonomous than public schools because:

> In the private sector, where schools are controlled by markets - indirectly and from the bottom up - autonomy is generally high. In the public sector, where schools are controlled by politics - directly and from the top down - autononomy is generally low (p. 183).

Increased parental involvement and meaningful partnerships between families and schools are other benefits derived from choice. (Seeley 1989; Raywid 1984; Nathan 1989). Parents are empowered in schools of choice and are required to enter a different relationship than is now evident in the typical public school. Parents, teachers and principals jointly establish and share responsibility for the academic growth of children in schools of choice.(Mueller, 1987).

CHOICE, MAGNET SCHOOLS AND INTEGRATION

Since its inception in the 1960's magnet schools have been the chief tool for desegregating public schools (Amen, 1989). Magnet schools exist to reduce isolation and a voluntary alternative to the mandatory assignment of students.

Magnet schools were first developed for large urban school districts and designed with special curricular programming to attract white and minority populations. In commenting on the politics of urban education, Archbald (1988) suggested that magnet schools may serve multiple functions. He felt that magnet schools reduce conflicts with busing, improve the image of educational quality of larger urban districts and retain black and white middle income parents in urban schools.

Many researchers have proposed that the traditional role of the magnet school as a desegregation strategy may be changing. (Alves and Willie, 1987; McCurdy, 1985; Glenn, 1989). McCurdy (1985) reported that the benefits that magnets offer; namely diversity of choices, renewed parental involvement,

and a concern for the quality of education not only exceed their intended purposes of integration, but also embrace the idea of alternative schools. Glenn (1989), Director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Educational Equity, saw choice as a mechanism for promoting equity and integration in public schools. However, he suggested that the benefits of parental choice and class integration make sense on their own merit. He cited pedagogical and cultural reasons for making choice available to parents:

1. Students learn more if we take into account their strengths.
2. Schools with a clear educational mission, a coherent approach to instruction are more effective.
3. Teachers with freedom to make professional decisions - and accountability for results - bring more energy and creativity to the classroom.
4. Students and their parents are more committed to the educational mission of schools that they have chosen (p. 49).

Raywid (1985) suggested that there is an apparent shift in the orientation of magnet schools, a maturation of the concept. She summarized the maturation in the following way:

> However, as the magnet idea has matured and additional concerns have shaped public discussion, a shift has gradually occurred in magnet school orientation- or more properly, an expansion has taken place, from an exclusive preoccupation with effecting desegregation to including an emphasis on quality education or educational options for the district (Fleming et al, 1982).
>
> Shifts in emphasis have paralleled the discovery that magnets are somewhat less effective in desegregating schools than has been hoped, but a great deal more effective in improving educational quality, and simultaneously, school image and support (p. 449-450).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Steubenville City Schools faced the need for restructuring prior to the

1989- 90 school year. A School- Community Needs Assessment revealed the following concerns:

1. As stated previously, the Steubenville City Schools are the lone urban school system in the immediate area. The population is over 50% Roman Catholic and strongly supports the 1, 400 student parochial school system.

2. The steel industry , which constitutes the major employment in the area was in the midst of their downsizing efforts to salvage the industry. Weirton Steel Corporation had initiated the first Employee Stock Option Plan in the industry. Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel Company, had begun efforts to work their way free from Chapter Eleven Bankrupcy proceedings.

3. The aforementioned factors referred to in # 2, had created an impact on moving the City population from 29,000 in 1979 to 23,000 in 1989. The Steubenville City School population had moved from 3,450 in 1979 to 2,850 in 1989.

4. Adjusting to the declining student rate, the school system had been re-organized twice in the past ten years. The most recent venture in 1984, had moved the district to a K-5 neighborhood elementary setting and eliminated two large K-8 elementary schools. A system wide Middle School was also placed into operation.

5. The shifting and decreasing student population had brought an imbalance in racial makeup to several of the neighborhood elementary schools. The 1984 reorganizational plan did not meet federal guidelines in regard to desegregation of students. (The school system has a 32% minority makeup).

6. Senate Bill 140, Ohio's Education Resructuring Plan, had been introduced to the public. A section of the legislation called for each Ohio School District to formulate a policy pertaining to open enrollment with neighboring districts. A policy was also to be drafted dealing with mandatory intra- district enrollment .These policies would be effective with the beginning of the 1993-94 school year.

7. The inter- district enrollment measure had financial implications. Baker and Carey's, Handbook of Ohio School Law-1993-94, indicates " ... The Ohio Department of Education shall annually subtract students and add the receiving district, the amount of student aid (2,817.00 per student in 1993-94) and excess costs which correspond to the number of students involved."

ADVISORY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

A 22 member Superintendent's Advisory Committee , chaired by a Franciscan University Vice President, reviewed the concerns listed in The Needs Assessment. Five basic recommendations were forwarded to the Superintendent of Schools and Steubenville Board of Education in January, 1989:

1. A study be initiated to develop quality parental choice options in three of the six city elementary schools.

2. A pilot system wide parental choice option be placed into operation with the 1989-90 school year.

3. Franciscan University personnel be involved as a resource to the Steubenville City Schools in shaping future parental choice options.

4. The Local Education Association, teaching staff and parents be actively involved in the formation of choice options.

5. Three choice options be placed into operation prior to the state mandated open enrollment legislation taking effect with the beginning of the 1993-94 school year.

PARENTAL SURVEY INFORMATION

Committee members made visitations to Parental Choice Schools in Columbus, Lima, Akron, Ohio and Pittsburgh Pennsylvania.

Presentations were made in each elementary school. The purpose of each presentation was to review the seven aforementioned concerns revealed in the needs assessment. The postive aspects of parental choice options were also a feature of each presentation.

A questionnaire dealing with curricular preference of parents in the city school district was mailed to each elementary school parent. An appeal to parochial parents who may have an interest in choice options was extended through a newpaper adverisement explaining the benefits of choice along with the questionnaire. (38 parochial parents completed the questionnaire). The survey response to each question is listed below:
(72% of the parents responded to the survey)

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1. Do you support elementary parental choice options ? = YES - 68 %.

2. Would you consider sending your child to a choice school? = YES - 61%.

3. Does the development of choice options seem to be a sensible approach to improving education in our school system? = YES - 64%.

4. Do you approve of Franciscan University professional staff members assisting in the development of choice options? = YES 78 %.

5. The results of the forced ranking of curricular emphasis for a choice school:

Computer Science= 32%

Fine Arts= 28 %

Math and Science- 20%

International Studies- 16%

Other eg. Great Books, Physical Education etc.- 4%

UNIVERSITY INVOLVEMENT

Education Department members of Franciscan University took part in the visitations to five Parental School sites. The initial pilot endeavor involved University personnel in the Computer Science and Fine Arts Departments. Their expertise with staff development and curricular planning were major factors in bringing confidence and credibility to the pilot program. University personnel were instrumental in shaping the success of Wells School of Parental Choice which featured a curriculum emphasis in Computer Science and Fine Arts. The school opened for students in September, 1989.

Franciscan University International Studies and Math and Science Departments worked with staff and parents in the area of International Studies and Math and Science with staff development and curricular planning. The Education Department also assisted in developing programming. In addition, the International Studies Club, consisting of over 65 Franciscan University students , have been active participants in developing Garfield Parental Choice featuring International Studies as a curricular emphasis. Garfield and Roosevelt Parental School of Choice emphasizing Math and Science Technology opened for students

in September , 1991.

The collaboration with University personnel in the early stages of each program has created a bonding and interest between school, parents, students in each parental choice school. University personnel continue as active participants in the formative and summative evaluation of parental choice programming in The Steubenville City Schools.

TEACHER ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT

The Steubenville Education Association has been the lone bargaining agent in Steubenville City Schools for 35 years. The Association has representaion on the Superintendent's Advisory Committee and were involved with all decision making pertaining to the development of choice options in Steubenville City Schools.

Agreements regarding personnel decision making, transfer requests and decisions dealing with curricular options were developed in collaborative fashion with the involvement of parents, University and school personnel. Exemplary cooperation enabled the choice of teacher and administrative assignments to be made on the basis of interest and preparation.

CHOICE OPTION POSITIVES

1. Each Parental School of Choice has a deep sense of committment to their educational mission.

2. The students, parents and staff have made the decision to be there.

3. The choice options have enabled the school system to promote equity and integration in the schools.

4. The school district was placed into a proactive posture in dealing with the effects of intra and inter school open enrollment.

5. The district has benefitted from parochial and outside district students enrolling in the parental choice schools.

6. Parental support groups have been developed at each Choice School. These groups are the strongest and most supportive parent groups in the district.

7. University personnel are actively involved and committed to assisting in the development of quality programming at each site.

8. A sense of empowerment on the part of parents, staff and students exists at each Parental Choice School .

9. The initial pilot program enabled the district to refine the original endeavor and eliminate miscues in shaping the two other options.

10. The three choice options have caused an expansion in curricular offerings at Middle School and High School levels.

The choice options have been well received. All parties involved from the onset: Community, School System and University have a vested interest in choice in The Steubenville City Schools.

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